



Diagnosing and Managing Problems with Walking

Walking may be impaired in people with MS, but mobility doesn't have to be. The goal of treatment is to address any symptoms that interfere with walking and recommend strategies that can help people stay as active and independent as they would like to be.

Factors That Can Interfere with Walking

- **Fatigue**, either primary MS fatigue (lassitude) or fatigue from deconditioning or poor sleep, can make it difficult for people to walk.
- **Spasticity (stiffness and/or spasms)** can make legs feel heavy and difficult to move.
- **Weakness** can result from deconditioning or from damage to the nerve fibers in the central nervous system that stimulate the muscles in the legs.
- **Dizziness (light-headedness) and vertigo (a sensation of the world spinning)** can make it uncomfortable and unsafe to move around.
- **Sensory changes (numbness, pins-and-needles)** in the legs or feet can make it difficult to feel the ground.
- **Balance problems** caused by MS lesions in the cerebellum can make it hard for a person to walk steadily without falling.
- **Vision problems** are common and varied in MS, from double-vision to blurred vision to vision that feels jumpy, any of which can interfere with walking around safely.

Clearly, walking is a complex activity that can be affected in a variety of ways. Neurologists, neuro-ophthalmologists, and physical therapists have the expertise to identify and address many of these problems with medication and/or rehabilitation strategies including stretching, gait and balance training, and exercise. However, some problems may remain, making walking difficult. Mobility aids are the key to remaining active, safe, and independent when walking independently is no longer easy or practical. Mobility aids include:

- **Canes**, including those with a base and multiple legs for greater stability
- **Forearm crutches** that provide extra stability and support

- **Wheeled walkers**, including those with seats for easy “rest stops”
- **Motorized scooters**, primarily for individuals who can walk and balance but want to conserve energy
- **Manual wheelchairs** that allow a person to move independently or with assistance
- **Power wheelchairs** that are custom-made to meet a person’s needs and accommodate a person’s limitations (for example, with different steering options, head supports, or cushions)

The solution to disability is mobility, and the range of options to enhance mobility is almost unlimited. The first step is to see the use of these tools as taking charge of one’s MS impairments rather than giving in to them. Different tools work for different activities, so building a tool chest is the optimal way to maximize mobility. A rehabilitation evaluation with a physical and/or occupational therapist is the best first step in improving mobility.